

2.0 Rediscovering the Heart of Blacksburg -- The Master Plan

2.1 Reconnecting Downtown With Its Citizens

2.1.1 Goal: An Authentic Town Center

Blacksburg residents take pride in downtown and identify it as “their place” to gather, enjoy entertainment, and participate in civic life.

2.1.2 Background

Throughout the interview process and strategic assessment of Blacksburg, a theme emerged that Blacksburg’s downtown had become less relevant to the day-to-day life of Blacksburg’s permanent residents. Because downtown is also the location of a Virginia Tech, the separate identity of downtown Blacksburg seemed to be overwhelmed at times.

This feeling for residents is compounded by the fact that much of the downtown retail uses that longtime Blacksburg residents remember has left the community altogether. In spite of the retail loss, downtown Blacksburg has retained such critical institutions as its Post Office, key religious congregations, and Town Hall and has developed new institutions such as the Farmers Market and the Lyric Theatre that attract visitors from across the community.

While these institutions are important, Blacksburg as a community lacks the civic symbols and gathering places that define and unify the town. The challenge now is to reconnect Blacksburg with its citizens by creating places and activities for citizens to take part in, shops and restaurants that all of Blacksburg can enjoy, and “knit together” a civic life for the community that takes place downtown.

2.1.3 Assets/Opportunities

- Downtown Blacksburg is a vibrant place with retail shops and restaurants already in place.
- Downtown has retained many of its key civic institutions including local churches, Town Hall, the Post Office.
- New Civic uses have become quite successful at attracting people downtown – the Farmers’ Market and the Lyric Theatre.

- Events like the summer concert series and Steppin' Out have been successful at bringing people into downtown.
- The University and the Town are experiencing unparalleled levels of cooperation.

2.1.4 Liabilities/Challenges

- Downtown has increasingly become "student dominated"
- Much of the traditional retail base has vacated the downtown (and Blacksburg altogether)
- Downtown lacks civic gathering places and a unified identity that encourages local pride.
- While successful, venues such as the Lyric Theatre rely on "critical mass" of activities and events to sustain their success. This has not yet emerged in downtown.

2.1.5 Objectives

- A. Provide gathering spaces for all walks of life in the community.
- B. Host community festivals and events downtown.
- C. Create civic symbols that define downtown Blacksburg for the community as a whole.
- D. Create pedestrian links from downtown to neighborhoods and parks to make downtown more accessible for citizens.
- E. Retain civic activity centers downtown (Post Office, Town Hall, educational facilities, churches)

2.1.6 Action Strategies

Short Term – 2001-2002

- *Create Blacksburg Events.* Blacksburg Events would be a non-profit organization to sponsor events downtown on a regular basis. Many similar organizations seek sponsorships for events and host them year-round. Often, these organizations start small, perhaps with quarterly events. They are frequently associated closely with merchants' associations and strive to host events that will get people downtown. For Blacksburg, it will be important to hold events that are specifically geared toward residents of Blacksburg and the surrounding region.
- *Develop Traffic Calming and Crosswalks throughout Downtown.* Traffic through downtown Blacksburg can be busy. This is amplified by a traffic pattern that northbound traffic, once through the core of downtown, encourages speed



Figure 1: Simple painted crosswalks and pedestrian islands recommended for downtown Blacksburg

with wide travel lanes and a limited number of lights from College Avenue to Prices Fork Road. A thorough traffic calming strategy is needed for downtown that will slow down traffic and encourage a more pedestrian friendly environment. Figure 1 shows pedestrian medians that are “safe zones” in the middle of traffic islands. We also recommend that the bold white painted crosswalks be installed rather than any special paving pattern for crosswalks on Main Street. Exhibit 2 on the following page shows where crosswalks should be installed along Main Street in downtown Blacksburg.

- *Continue Pedestrian Links to Adjacent Neighborhoods.* Blacksburg has done an outstanding job of creating Greenways and pedestrian connections. The master plan illustrates extending this effort through downtown in a more thorough way. Exhibit 3 shows the existing pedestrian ways through downtown and recommended new routes that should be considered. Each of these pedestrian ways should be signed with a logo sign and distance markers so users know what trail they are on and how far to certain destinations.
- *Furniture Improvements.* Creating a “palette” of furniture for downtown Blacksburg that is unified, dignified, and sturdy is an important goal of the Downtown Action Group. For the furniture palette, we recommend two options. The first is a continuation of the existing styled bench in a more sturdy model that might make use of steel or synthetic wood slats, this would be complemented by a more sturdy garbage receptacle and bike racks. The second is a style that incorporates the sixteen square logo in a custom bench and trash receptacle. If either style is chosen, we recommend using the existing light standard with a replacement luminaire in more sturdy material. These can be replaced incrementally. Exhibit 4 shows these options.

Medium Term – 2002-2005

- *Work With Montgomery County Schools on the Blacksburg Middle School Site.* The Blacksburg Middle School site is a critical anchor for downtown Blacksburg. Much speculation in the community has occurred about the future of this facility. Montgomery County Schools has expressed that an educational function would remain the key use of the site for both the short and long term and has indicated a willingness to pursue creative partnering opportunities to help determine the long term future of the site. The Master Plan for Blacksburg presents several design principles that should be explored as the community looks at long-term uses for the site. These are:

Exhibit 2: Traffic crosswalks
through downtown

[Click here to see Exhibit 2 & 3](#)

Exhibit 3: Recommended
pedestrian ways through
downtown

Exhibit 4: Furniture palette boards and manufacturer model numbers.

[Click here to see Exhibit 4](#)

- Explore obtaining private properties adjacent to the site for future expansions or private development
- Examine development of a forecourt plaza/park that would front on Main Street.
- Examine opportunities to expand the school facility to accommodate future uses.

Exhibit five illustrates these design principles.

- *Create a Cohesive Government Campus.* Town Hall, the Police Station, and the Library are important civic functions for Blacksburg. The Master Plan indicates some long-term recommendations for the relationship of these institutions. These are:
 - Develop a park/plaza at the end of Draper Road to create a unifying element between the civic functions while buffering the adjacent residential neighborhood.
 - Consider longer-term expansion opportunities for Town Hall that might occur on the Doc Roberts site and adjacent properties should that location be vacated.
 - Consider the long-term reuse of the strip center on Draper Road for future parking to serve all of the civic functions in this district.

Exhibit 5 shows the recommended improvements to this area.

- *Draper Road Improvements.* The Draper Road Greenway from College Avenue to Clay Street is an older recommendation that has been implemented over time. The master plans illustrates continuing this Greenway concept and enhancing it further through cohesive use of furniture, lighting, and landscape material. The goal is for Draper Road to feel more like an “address” street rather than a service street. An example of how this might look is shown in Figure 2.
- *Main Street Crossing/Alumni Circle.* This is one of three linked projects in the Main Street/College Avenue area envisioned to redefine the future vision of downtown Blacksburg. Main Street Crossing and Alumni Circle would be a complete re-design of the existing street pattern. The result would be a large center median in Main Street allowing for better pedestrian crossings, a roundabout at the terminus of the Alumni Mall and a new civic feature in the form of a Clock Tower in the center of the median. The changes would involve restoring northbound traffic to the “Old Main Street” block, expanding the median and grading the area to create



Figure 2: Example of continued improvements along Draper Road.

Exhibit 5: Town Government
complex and Potential
Development of the Blacksburg
Middle School

[Click here to see Exhibit 5](#)

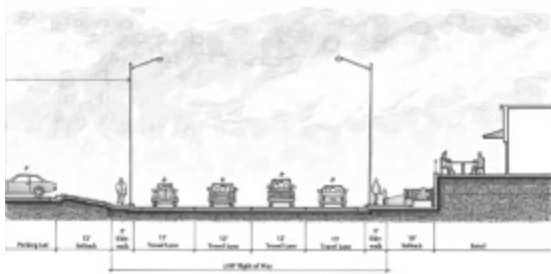


Figure 3: Current conditions along North Main Street

what is, in effect, an extended roundabout. Exhibits 6 and 7 show the potential for this redevelopment.

- *Henderson Lawn.* The second of the three linked projects is the re-grading of Henderson Lawn. This area has long been a gathering place for the community and is the symbolic heart of Blacksburg. The Master Plan recommends retaining Henderson Lawn as a large town green with slight regrading at the eastern end of the lawn to allow for better views from Main Street to College Avenue and for easier use and maintenance of the lawn area. This area can be regraded without losing the large trees on the site that contribute to its unique character. Exhibit 7 provides a plan view of the regrading of Henderson Lawn.
- *College Avenue Promenade.* The third of the three improvement projects to the Main/College Avenue area is the creation of the College Avenue Promenade. This project would involve the creation of a large walkway and seatwall along the Henderson Lawn that would act as a Town Plaza for Blacksburg. The promenade could be part of an alumni project for a Virginia Tech class to recognize outstanding alumni of the University or a joint venture of the Town and the University to create a unique place for the community. Close coordination with Alumni groups of the university could help this project come to fruition sooner than might be expected. The before image and after sketch for this project is shown in Exhibit 8.
- *North Main Street Enhancements.* Short-term improvements to North Main Street have already been shown above. Longer-term improvements might include more detailed improvements to make this area more pedestrian friendly. Figure 3 shows the area in its current condition. Exhibit 9 shows two options that might be considered that would allow for tree planting, more pedestrian friendly sidewalks and a traffic calming effect in this area.

Exhibit 6: Cross Section Showing
Existing Conditions and
Recommended Improvements to
Main Street and College Avenue

[Click here to see Exhibit 6](#)

Exhibit 7: Plan view showing roundabout at Alumni Mall, New Median treatment and narrowed Main Street Corridor.

[Click here to see Exhibit 7](#)

Exhibit 8: Perspective Sketch of
the College Avenue Promenade

[Click here to see Exhibit 8](#)

Exhibit 9: Recommended
Improvements to the North Main
Street Area

[Click here to see Exhibit 9](#)